

Merchants, Missionaries and American Policy Toward China:
The Formation of the Open Door Policy

An Honors Thesis (HIST 499)

by

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PURPOSE OF THESIS

This paper explores the impact of two interest groups, merchants and Protestant missionaries, upon American foreign policy toward China in the nineteenth century. Examining their influence upon American policy sheds light upon the supposedly "radical departure" of the Open Door Notes. The paper discusses three distinct eras: American relations with China prior to the establishment of the treaty port system, the effects of the treaty port system on American activities in China from 1860 until 1890, and the immediate backdrop of the 1890s to Secretary of State John Hay's production of the Open Door Notes. The Open Door Policy was consistent with prior statements of American ideology yet was also a product of America's changed power status and altered perception of vital interests. Thus the Open Door was both old and new.

U.S. government activities vis-a-vis China in the nineteenth century were influenced by considerations that have often influenced American policy: the quest for souls and silver. American ideals and interests were naturally formed in accordance with the United States' perception of its capabilities and the anticipated response of the world community, in view of vocal U.S. public opinion largely swayed by merchants and missionaries. This policy had to be flexible enough to respond to relative shifts in the world balance of power, the changed attitudes or involvement of U.S. citizens, heightened U.S. capacities to promote strategies which best suited its interests, and individual Administrations' objectives, all of which characterized the divergent 1890s. The U.S. had fairly consistently upheld its ideals and interests, the promotion of free trade and the security of American citizens in the Far East, under changing conditions from mid-century until 1900. By the turn of the century new ideological currents, increased missionary fervor, preoccupation with industrial overproduction, rising anti-foreign sentiment among the Chinese, and perceived threats to the U.S. position in Asia by European powers had developed an atmosphere favorable to the official promulgation of the Open Door Policy. The United States therefore actively promoted a policy which it had actually followed from its earliest engagements in China.

The earliest American ties to China involved trade. From 1784, when the merchant vessel *Empress of China* sailed from New York to Canton, Americans associated the Orient with profitable commerce. Alexander Hamilton summed up Federalist sentiment in the late 1700s when he expressed that China offered "an additional and extensive field for the enterprise of our merchants and mariners and an additional outlet for the commodities of the country."¹ The China trade was established by adventuresome American entrepreneurs, but the government sought to foster their activity through diplomacy. When early merchants petitioned their

political leaders to lend support to this "increasing and profitable branch of commerce," the Washington granted favorable tariff treatment to Chinese goods, maintained an honorary consul at Canton, and attempted negotiations with Britain to open India to Americans in search of goods to sell in China.²

In the early nineteenth century the government wanted to augment American exports to China, but trade was restricted by the Qing Dynasty to the port of Canton. The Americans also had difficulty in finding a commodity for which there was considerable demand in China. The major American export to China was ginseng, but a greater profit could be made by smuggling opium, which was illegal. While British merchants became frustrated with the Chinese and indignant toward their restrictions, American merchants advised the U.S. government against doing anything that might cause China to retaliate against their business. British merchants provoked the Chinese with their opium from India in an effort to expand their gains from trade, and dared local officials in Canton to interfere with their activity. The American government had acknowledged China's right to prohibit opium smuggling and openly declared that it would not attempt to protect any American ship caught in the act of smuggling.

Witnessing the trouble the British were stirring, the American merchants importuned Congress not to go too far in pressing China to grant, by treaty, rights which they had already secured by personal and private understanding. They wished to avoid radical change, as the small number of American "China hands" were enjoying profits and relative freedoms from a system they hoped would remain intact. The initial American attempt to place relations with China on a treaty basis came in the 1830s, during the administration of Andrew Jackson. The Jacksonians sought the expansion of trade, so the President sent Edmund Roberts,

an official in the U.S. consular service, on a mission to find new commercial opportunities in the Orient. Besides attempting to secure mutually beneficial trade, Roberts was told to make the Chinese aware that "it is against the principles of our nation to build forts, or make expansive establishments in foreign countries" and that "we never make conquests as the English, the French, and the Dutch have done."³

Although his mission failed to establish communications with the local Chinese authorities, it reveals the aims of American diplomacy and the outlook of Americans. Americans believed they had a special message for mankind. They felt they were a new breed of people, compared with the Europeans. They believed in egalitarian democracy and small government. They believed they possessed a superior way of life both materially and spiritually than any other empire they might come up against. As a result Americans were very expansive and self-righteous. Such sentiment can be discerned in the following excerpt from a mid-nineteenth century journal:

There is a God in history, and the finger of an Almighty providence is evident in many events which have marked the march of America. More than human wisdom has thrown open that Western portal of our land, and welcomed over its threshold the natives of a nation as old as tradition, and until now, as immobile as their own stone-eyed Boodh. When China, the hoary type of antiquity, embraced America, the young bride of futurity, we may be sure that it was prophetic of more than mere gold-digging for both.⁴

Roberts' arrival had stimulated anxieties in the American merchant community. Some merchants feared that the attempt to obtain a commercial treaty would antagonize the Chinese, seem less than properly submissive, and hurt existing trade rather than expand it.⁵ Stephen Lockwood asserts that the merchants

took this position because in their competitive struggle they exploited the Qing Dynasty's inability to enforce its laws, and bribed corrupt officials whenever possible.⁶ In trade, coastal shipping, up-country purchasing, and opium importation the merchants enjoyed relative freedom and advantages.

Just as the British merchants could be more belligerent with the Chinese because they were supported by the Royal Navy, the American stance was proper in order to maintain their merchant interests. Regardless of the Jacksonian expansive outlook, the United States was not prepared to make a large military commitment to the Far East. The costs of maintaining a forceful Asian presence would be too great for the relatively new nation. John Fairbank, in Chinese-American Interactions, asserts that although China was regarded as a "field of adventure and enterprise for private individuals, it was not an object of great national concern at the governmental level."⁷

The indifferent attitude of the American government toward China was symptomatic of U.S. foreign policy in general in the first half of the nineteenth century. America was occupied with its continental expansion, and U.S. isolationism was prevalent in popular opinion. It sufficed the interests of the United States government to follow a policy of benign neglect regarding China, and, as Thomas Bailey wrote of the era, "the student of diplomacy finds little of significance to record."⁸

China was a field of interest for the American Protestant missionaries, but Christianity was forbidden in the 1830s. The first American missionaries to arrive in Canton braved a Chinese promise of death by strangulation for anyone caught proselytizing.⁹ Because of this threat, after only a short stay in Canton or Macao

most American missionaries went to regions in Southeast Asia to learn the Chinese language from Chinese communities under Western supervision. From mission centers in Malacca, Java, Batavia, Penang, and Singapore missionaries awaited the chance to get to the China mainland.¹⁰

The American missionary enterprise in China was an outgrowth of the great religious revival experienced in the Northeastern United States in the early 19th century. In this Second Great Awakening, preachers called from the pulpit for a revitalized Christianity to meet the challenge of a secularizing society. In 1816 the Boston Recorder announced:

Behold, fellow Christians of the United States, what a field of usefulness, what scenes of blessedness are unfolding to your view. American ships are soon to sail for Canton, to accumulate worldly treasure by the importation of the products of China: Let them not depart without carrying with them some testimony, that the American Christians take an interest in the spiritual welfare of that nation, who have contributed so largely to the temporal wealth of the United States.¹¹

Thus to the existing commercial involvement of Americans in China was added a religious involvement, an especially Arminian desire to bring the Chinese into the kingdom of God. The missionary felt responsible for the spiritual fate of the heathen overseas. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions stated in its eighteenth annual report of 1827 that the object of foreign missions was "no less than the moral rejuvenation of the world."¹² Missionaries were encouraged to export salvation, and their superior culture.

Due to their sense of spiritual obligation, the missionaries were frustrated by the hostility of the Chinese and the regulations against traveling inland and building churches. They recommended aggressive action to open China. By 1838

Reverend David Abeel and Rev. W. Orr were arguing that more than civil disobedience was necessary to break down the Chinese restrictions on their efforts to proselytize in the Celestial Empire. Nothing short of "an armed invasion, hopefully carried out by an Anglo-American expeditionary force" would "sweep away the hateful barriers to the gospel", resulting in "progress" for China and the world.¹³

By 1839, missionaries were in favor of war to open China. In that year Commissioner Lin provided the British Admiralty with a *casus belli* by confiscating opium belonging to British merchants in Whampoa. While some American merchants condemned the British Opium War as "one of the most unjust wars ever waged by one nation against another," other merchants' perceptions of their opportunities had changed as a result of apparent British success.¹⁴ Some traders became more supportive of U.S. governmental intervention because they did not want Britain to gain a tremendous advantage at the expense of their business. Heartened by the concessions the British were able to obtain for themselves through force, Americans in Canton asked Congress for a commissioner to negotiate a commercial treaty, and for warships "to keep the natives friendly".¹⁵

Many American missionaries praised the war and demanded that China must "bend or break." For the missionaries, legal justification for the Opium War was transcended by the will of God. In an ecumenical spirit binding Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Southern Baptists, the war in Asia was agreed upon as the "scheme of the God of nations...to open a highway for those who would preach the Word." John Fairbank asserts in his book, The Missionary Enterprise in China and America, that "between 1840 and 1900 every Western invasion of China was almost unanimously conceived of by American

missionaries as an act of Providence." An overwhelming amount seemed to feel that "force alone would break down their [the Chinese] minds and compel the Chinese to abandon their haughty isolation."¹⁶ In describing the slaughter of Chinese soldiers by the Royal Navy and Marines in his journal, Southern Baptist J. Lewis Shuck wrote, "I regard such scenes...as the direct instruments of the Lord in clearing away the rubbish which impedes the advancement of Divine Truth."¹⁷

Some later missionary accounts did show regret for the use of force, as Peter Matson wrote in his bibliography, "the only sad thing about it was that China did not open her doors of her own accord, but only under compulsion by Western military power."¹⁸ On the whole, the atrocities of the Opium War were viewed as a necessary evil. Violence as a means to open China was either welcomed or at least accepted by God's people as His mysterious way to save the Chinese. American missionaries hoped to gain treaty privileges as a result of the Opium War, but this religious doctrine seems morally skewed.

The war resulted in several unequal treaties negotiated with China by the powers of the West. Although American soldiers did not participate in the Opium War, the American government was encouraged by both merchants and missionaries to obtain advantages given to Great Britain, so that trade could remain fair and China could be opened to Christianity. The activity of the U.S. government has been referred to by many recent historians as "jackal diplomacy," or the attempt of American envoys to reap the same spoils as the British without putting forth the same effort.

Some aspects of jackal diplomacy motivated President Tyler to send Caleb Cushing to Emperor Dao Guang in 1843. Secretary of State Daniel Webster clearly

expressed U.S. ambitions when he instructed Cushing to "secure the entry of American ships and cargoes into Amoy, Ningpo, Shanghai, and Fuchow in terms as favorable as those which are enjoyed by English merchants."¹⁹ This instruction was the first official statement on U.S. policy towards China. The policy aim was "to establish the means of friendly commercial intercourse."²⁰ While the supreme task of the mission was to secure all the privileges wrung from China by British gunboats, Webster also stressed that the mission be viewed by the Chinese as "entirely pacific," offering "respect and goodwill to the greatest Empire in Asia."²¹ Because of Cushing's mission, the United States gleaned the benefits of the Treaty of Nanjing, which stipulated a "fair and regular tariff," and was able to negotiate the 1844 Treaty of Wangxia.²² It imposed fixed tariff duties, unilateral most-favored-nation treatment, and harsher obligations in regard to extraterritoriality on the Chinese, because Cushing wanted to obtain privileges beyond those granted to the British. The Treaty of Wangxia marks the beginning of recognized official relations between the United States and China.

After the Treaty of Wangxia, American trade with China expanded. From 1845-1860 the total volume of trade rose from \$9.5 million to \$22.5 million.²³ In the two decades following the establishment of the treaty port system, foreign trade increased along the China coast. After the U.S. westward expansion reached the Pacific coast, the Americans became confident that they were destined to dominate the trade of East Asia.

The bulk of trade between China and the West at mid-century was carried on by Western merchants organized in trading firms that pooled entrepreneurial talent, capital, and business connections. Known as commission houses, they were the

characteristic institution of the treaty ports; from their headquarters in these ports they carried out operations necessary to secure China teas and silks for luxury consumption in the United States. The larger American commission houses had close contacts with officers and diplomats. Western diplomats often relied on the knowledge and opinions of resident merchants who, in the middle of the 19th century, had had the most contact with the Chinese. Augustine Heard and Company was one of the American houses in Canton. The company maintained contacts with important officials in the hope that it would be favored with information or contracts. The description below depicts the atmosphere of the commission houses and their familiarity with officialdom:

Our house has become a rendezvous for the (Anglo-French) squadron, a sort of military and diplomatic club and every afternoon our front portico has become the fashionable lounging place for officers and men of leisure.²⁴

Such associations had impact in respect to merchant influence on official governmental policy. Yet while Lockwood focuses great detail and attention to the merchant's effect on diplomacy under the treaty port system, John Fairbank repudiates the merchant's importance on American China policy, saying that the U.S. sent "a commissioner out to China only occasionally, did not bother to send a paid consul until after 1854," and even then did not rely on specially trained consular officers, but rather appointed merchant-consuls who might have had private interests in the China market but who did not really affect American policy or national opinion regarding the China trade.²⁵ Perhaps these daily rendezvous with diplomats which Campbell describes had little impact on U.S. China policy, and were really social gatherings with more importance for the financial success of Augustine Heard and Company.

Hostilities between China and Britain continued throughout the 1850s. Washington maintained a resolutely pacific policy despite pressures from merchants, missionaries, and others favoring the use of force. For the administration to condone American participation in the Anglo-Chinese conflict would betray the American self-perception of being a new breed and violate the isolationist tendencies of a citizenry which scorned entangling alliances and the colonial conquests of the Europeans. However, in a pragmatic way the U.S. did capitalize on the opportunities created by the Europeans to negotiate advantages with the vulnerable Chinese.

Merchants and missionaries both disagreed with the U.S. government on its proper role in China. In late 1856 the Chinese fired on the American flag in the trading center at Canton and the American squadron returned gunfire, but Washington authorities were unwilling to sanction further military action.²⁶ Merchants feared without the use of force, Americans would be perceived by the Chinese as weak. Speaking on behalf of a strong military and diplomatic show of force to improve his company's position in trade, Augustine Heard said, "The first element to impress the oriental is power."²⁷ This reasoning was and remains a key ingredient in American ignorance of another culture in the conduct of foreign policy. The American government responded to similar comments by saying:

We are not party to the existing hostilities and have no intention to interfere in their political concourse, or gain a foothold in their country. We go there to engage in trade, but under suitable guarantees for its protection. The extension of our commercial intercourse must be the work of individual enterprise, and to this element of our national character we may safely leave it.²⁸

This passage affirms the sentiment that free trade was part of the American's nature. Perhaps justly reflecting the economic stake of the Americans, the official U.S. position was that trade must be protected, but not assisted by the military.

Some merchants agreed with the governmental policy, as J.J. Moore wrote in an editorial in a merchant tract entitled "China and the Indies: Our Manifest Destiny" that U.S. merchants should peacefully penetrate the Asiatic countries and concentrate on the Pacific rather than the Atlantic, and be ready "to advance more boldly with our wares and fabrics into a quarter of the globe to which we have been too long comparative strangers."²⁹

Washington's response to the missionary pressure for force to further open China to the Gospel was to announce that the missionaries "are not specially charged with the diplomatic functions of their government."³⁰ When Peter Parker, a former missionary and the American Commissioner in China in 1856, wrote the State Department favoring American occupation of Taiwan, the Department replied:

This country, you will constantly bear in mind, is not at war with the Government of China, nor does it seek to enter into that empire for any other purpose than those of lawful commerce, and for the protection of lives and property of its citizens...³¹

The U.S. Government firmly refused to be associated with any armed intervention in China, and reiterated that the United States did not seek to obtain any territorial concessions.

The missionaries pressed harder for U.S. governmental retaliation when American missionaries and their converts were massacred at Tientsin in 1858. The government responded by seeking a revised treaty with China through its diplomatic agent, William B. Reed. The Treaty of Tientsin negotiations were

assisted by several missionaries who served as interpreters. These interpreters had influence on the outcome of the treaty, as it not only benefited merchants but also contained several Toleration Clauses which addressed missionary interests. These clauses opened new cities to foreigners, gave missionaries the right to travel in the interior of China, opened the Yangtze River to foreign ships, and provided that neither the missionaries nor the Chinese converts "be interfered with or molested."³² In the words of Covenant Church missionary Peter Matson, "Thus were the doors to the closed country opened. It was in answer to many prayers by God's people in Western lands."³³

Prior to the 1860s, by supporting certain actions of Americans in the Orient and rejecting others, the American government had created a policy position. One aim of a nation's foreign policy is to use its power to attain the most benefit for itself in its relations with other countries. The U.S. at this time was a weak and underdeveloped power which did not have the means to exercise political or military ambitions in East Asia. American interests were restricted to trade and missionary work, so the government's reactions to events in China and to the requests of American merchants and missionaries were consistent with its desire to achieve the protection of its interests at minimum cost. The U.S. never seriously entertained territorial ambitions there and never endorsed the use of force in this period. The American government benefited from British power and utilized the most-favored-nation clause to promote its interests, claiming the same rights and privileges for U.S. nationals that had been accorded to other treaty powers. On occasion in treaty negotiations the U.S. government took advantage of a China weakened by other powers to obtain special privileges through diplomatic effort.

The treaties, products of U.S. jackal diplomacy, had altered the position of Americans in China by the 1860s. However, with the start of the U.S. Civil War most American interests in Asia subsided. The United States, preoccupied with internal problems, did not have the material means to sustain its prior presence in China, and most Americans no longer cared. Isolationism remained a guiding principle of American foreign policy. Opposing involvement in Asian affairs, Americans diverted their attention from China toward their own continent.

Part of the decline of U.S. interest in Asia also can be attributed to the decline of the opium trade resultant from the Opium Wars. Opium smuggling held little value for investment when compared with domestic opportunities provided by the war, westward expansion, and technological developments. Many merchants at mid-century pulled out of the China trade and became U.S. railway organizers. According to Fairbank, "the China trade was an important source of capital accumulated for America's domestic development."³⁴

With this decline in China's commercial importance to the United States, the influence of merchants in the U.S. consular service was gradually reduced. In the early period merchants made up nearly all the population of foreign communities in China and therefore held posts within the U.S. government as merchant-consuls. As the foreign population in treaty ports became diversified because of the toleration clauses, U.S. consuls had new obligations to other Americans. The merchant-consuls were superseded by "political" consuls.³⁵

Although merchant interest in China appeared to be on the decline, the Chinese Empire was the target of impressive American missionary endeavors following the creation of the toleration clauses. There was an influx of Protestant missionaries who not only believed in the imperative of giving the Gospel to the

non-Christian world, but who were also now guaranteed to have some protection. Chinese officials were bound by the Treaty of Tientsin to safeguard the activities of U.S. citizens. In 1867 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions committee, responding to America's westward expansion, urged missionaries to China by saying "the God of missions has brought this Empire, so populous, so idolatrous, nearer and nearer, that we may accept the field which He has assigned to us."³⁶

As increasing numbers of Americans answered this call, the missionaries had tremendous impact on American relations with China. In the words of historian Michael H. Hunt:

It was the missionary with long periods of residence and unmatched exposure to the culture who developed the most impressive and widely recognized claim to expertise. More than any other Americans in China they were able to put their views before the public. The Chinese Repository, learned accounts, letters and reports in mission periodicals, and talks and interviews while on home leave provided the public a steady diet of missionary opinion.³⁷

The missionaries became a major influence on American attitudes and policies toward China. Through magazines such as The Chinese Repository and other media, they disseminated information concerning the laws, customs, history, literature, and current events of the Empire.

Even though most preachers of the Gospel were not anxious to get involved in politics, what the missionaries encountered in China often struck them as so objectionable and contrary to religious teaching that it was difficult for them not to protest. In their impatience with the failure of the Chinese to respond to direct evangelism or even acts of service, American missionaries began to take an interest in diplomacy as a means of advancing the Christian cause. Some missionaries, such

as W.A.P. Martin, who served as an interpreter during negotiations of the Treaty of Tientsin, even became personally involved in the making of China policy.³⁸ Their actions had direct impact on Chinese society more than on policy-makers in Washington.

Acting as interpreters of Chinese culture to the Americans, the missionaries also served to transmit American culture to the Chinese. Because they worked largely among the lower classes and were critical of traditional practices and institutions, the missionaries undermined the confidence of their Chinese converts in the political status quo. Conversion to Christianity was appealing to Chinese outcasts and criminals, and other marginal members of Chinese communities. Because the missionaries pragmatically manipulated societal flaws to win converts, their actions were often irritating to the local Chinese moral majority. The Chinese mandarin class realized that the missionaries jeopardized the whole Chinese social order by working with the segment of the population that presented the greatest danger of revolt. Missionary activities threatened the power base of the mandarins. The rural Chinese peasantry acted as a conservative force in Chinese society. They frequently misunderstood Christian doctrine, especially when the missionaries attacked Confucian precepts, and were irritated by the missionary's imposition on their daily routine. For these reasons missionaries were distrusted by the majority of the population and sometimes attacked by those hostile to their teachings and presence.

The local Chinese often resented the flow of foreigners into their villages. The fact that China was forced to allow missionaries into the interior only under compulsion by Western military power "strengthened the old suspicion that

missionary work was at bottom a political movement."³⁹ By admitting the religion of the Western nations the Chinese also admitted the political power and influence of those nations. Riots often occurred, raising problems concerning the protection of American citizens and property for American diplomacy. The cumulative effect of the dissension and rioting resulting from increased missionary activity put a serious strain upon the governmental machinery of the Empire. With the Qing Dynasty's existence threatened, the U.S. diplomats in Peking had to take a policy position.

Several historians dispute the role of diplomatic legations in settling conflicts between missionaries and the Chinese. Paul Varg asserts that the government played a major role in protecting the activities of the missionaries:

...the missionary's fate depended upon the power represented in the foreign legation in Peking. So strong and so continuous was the antagonism toward the missionary that he could never have attempted to Christianize the country had not the Western nations with their superior force upheld his right to be there.⁴⁰

Certainly the intervention by the West in Chinese affairs was onerous to the local Chinese, and therefore frequently opposed. The Toleration Clauses nominally protected the missionaries from strong opposition and symbolized Western intrusion; however, the active role of the Western governments in ensuring missionary privileges has been debated. Michael Hunt, writing on events during the same time period, contradictorily states:

In the 1860s and early 1870s, diplomats in Peking withheld support for broad missionary pretensions on the grounds that missionary activity in the interior would weaken rather than strengthen the Chinese central government. The U.S. legation desired a strong Chinese government, and to unleash American missionaries would strain relations with China.⁴¹

A third perspective is offered by Kenneth Scott LaTourette:

The Governments of Great Britain and the United States, under whose protection most Protestants naturally came, never supported the missionary as a means of furthering their influence in China. Often their representatives were disinclined to allow him the privileges which he claimed, and advised him to restrict his activities. They backed the missionary in maintaining his obvious treaty rights, but did this reluctantly and distinctly because he was a citizen of their country and not because of his occupation.⁴²

Thus, both Hunt and LaTourette counter Paul Varg's supposition. The U.S. government may have pressured Chinese authorities to abide by the Treaty of Tientsin, but did not take advantage of superior military might to further missionary causes. LaTourette does admit that the government of the United States was more favorable to the missionaries than Great Britain, and gives two main reasons. First, that several missionaries and former missionaries were in the U.S. consular and diplomatic service, and second, "there were less American commerce to be jeopardized by the ill-will which Christian propaganda excited." LaTourette relates the words of an American minister in China in 1876: "Missionary cases call for a large share of the efforts of the legation."⁴³

Michael Hunt, who had said diplomats withheld support for missionaries when the toleration clauses were first in effect, suggests that the policy in the foreign legation eventually transformed to one of veiled support of the missionaries' endeavors. The missionaries, "however imprudent their conduct and excessive in their expectations of assistance," were increasingly recognized by the legation as a valuable civilizing agent.⁴⁴ The legation also worried that a missionary retreat from the interior, or appeasement of the Chinese on issues surrounding missionaries, would probably be hailed by the Chinese populace as a sign of

weakness, and might make the Chinese more belligerent towards all foreigners.⁴⁵

Despite these reasons, the legation only gave limited policy support to the missionaries because its prevailing diplomatic view remained that the missionaries were generating antagonisms with the potential to disrupt the development of the "vast" China market and weaken the Qing.⁴⁶ Thus missionary motives were at odds with the interests of merchants and U.S. diplomats.

So from 1860 until the late 1880s, the American government had further developed a policy that accommodated its needs. In its relations with the Qing, the U.S. still desired the protection of its citizens and an open field for commerce. The United States, as well as the other Western powers with interests in China, protected the Qing from Chinese rebellions and excessive missionary demands. The Westerners believed the Dynasty would adhere to the treaties it had signed after the Opium Wars, whereas other Chinese governments would not be legally bound. It was in the interest of commerce to maintain the Qing. Missionary and merchant interests were therefore at odds during this period. The government officially sided with the merchants, nominally supporting free trade in China despite the reality that the China trade had subsided. One account of the period declares that China comprised less than two per cent of the total export trade, and supplied only an insignificant fraction of total imports.⁴⁷

Merchant activity slumped in China from the 1860s to the late 1880s, but certain factors prevalent in the 1890s gave advocates of the China market new impetus. The Panic of 1893 was a propellant for American expansion across the

Pacific.⁴⁸ Many businessmen suggested that as a consequence of the tremendous growth of industry since the Civil War the United States was suffering from overproduction, and the financial panic was a logical manifestation of that reality.⁴⁹ The domestic market was thought to be saturated by a surplus that could not be consumed at home and which would become greater as time passed. A conviction that American industry was dependent on foreign markets developed.

China, until recently ignored by most Americans, again became viewed as a vast market possessing economic needs and presenting an opportunity for business interests. Although trade was relatively small throughout the 1890s, the market was perceived to be expanding and showed promise.⁵⁰ China was thought by both businessmen and politicians to be a new frontier, one which would keep American commerce competitive with Europe and would relieve America's industrial glut by absorbing its surplus goods.

By 1895 the United States executive began promulgating the benefits of the China trade and espousing principles which were later included in the Open Door Notes. President Grover Cleveland believed the government's role in the world was to lower the American tariff while securing equal access to desirable foreign markets, leaving the American corporations to compete with the other powers for the new markets emerging in the world. Given "a fair field and no favor" he confidently assumed that "American economic supremacy" could win its share of expanded markets without political and military burdens.⁵¹

In the 1890s several key industries appeared to be proof of America's ability to win the China market. One of these was the cotton goods industry. China purchased nearly half of all American exports of cotton; the second-largest importer

took only a fourth as much. From 1887-1897 the American exports to China of cottons increased by 121% in quantity and 59% in value, whereas exports from England and all other leading suppliers decreased in both categories. It appeared that the United States was capturing the Chinese demand, and the China market for cotton was second only to India. The cotton mills in the southern states staked their existence on this export. "You can at once see what the importance of the China trade is to us," a convention of cotton spinners from South Carolina wrote their congressman in 1899. "It is everything. The prosperity of the cotton-mill business of South Carolina depends on the China trade."⁵² The South had more than one motivation for supporting the principles which eventually embodied the Open Door. China's importance to southern industry overlapped with the relevance of the missionary movement to the bible belt.

The cotton goods industry was not the only industry dependent on the China trade. The volume of manufactured exports to China multiplied four times, from \$3.2 million in 1895 to \$13.1 million in 1899. Manufactured products accounted for 90% of American exports to China; and this fact was significant to those concerned with American industrial overproduction. The flour, iron and steel, and oil industries would suffer losses if commerce with China was interrupted. Railway speculators' and trading houses' activities would be drastically curtailed if American investment and commerce suffered discriminatory treatment. The general business community would no longer be able to count on the potential market to relieve the overproduction problem. With so much at stake the business community was willing to pressure Washington when the China market became threatened.⁵³

Charles Campbell argues the shift in U.S. policy toward interventionism was related solely to the increased lobbying efforts of the merchants with vested interests

in China in the late 1890s. William McKinley responded to the Europeans' rapid encroachments on the Chinese Empire with the pronouncement: "It should be our settled purpose to open trade wherever we can."⁵⁴ Keeping China open to American trade became, Campbell states, an issue of primary concern for the government.⁵⁵ He credits the business community for putting China's importance before the American public and the McKinley administration.

By the late 1890s U.S. business interests in China were in danger. The Russian and German spheres of influence in North China threatened to deny Americans opportunities for investment, trade, and political influence. The businessmen foresaw the potential partitioning of China and, believing that such a partition would destroy America's trading prospects, formed the Committee on American Interests in China. The purpose of this organization was to obtain a new Far Eastern policy from the government dedicated to the preservation of business interests. When Secretary of State Sherman in 1898 implied that a partition of China would not necessarily hurt American commerce, the Committee on American Interests in China began its campaign in earnest. The committee prepared a petition signed by businesses involved with the China trade, and sent this to the Chambers of Commerce of major U.S. cities, urging these organizations to demand of the government that the country's "important commercial interests" in China be safeguarded. According to Campbell, their actions alone put "the whole subject of American interests in the Far East into a position of national prominence" and "stirred Sec. of State Sherman...to send word to Germany and Russia that the United States favored 'open trade' with China."⁵⁶

Campbell exaggerated the role of American business in the Open Door Policy.

The Open Door was not founded on the whims of a narrow segment of the population with vested interests in China. However, the McKinley administration, faced with the possible partitioning of China, was assured of support from this influential segment of the American public. With diplomats, merchants, and missionaries now unified in their advocacy for a policy of firmness, McKinley and his Secretary of State John Hay could respond to the power struggle in East Asia with the Open Door Notes.

As American investors and traders of the 1890s possessed a world view that linked their own expansionist interests to the economic development of China, missionaries also increased their activity in China, linking their private expansionism to the general improvement of mankind. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, a "new generation of Americans was looking outward, directed from the goal of saving America to saving the world."⁵⁷ These new missionaries were contemporaries of the new statesmen with the vision to desire American influence in international politics and the businessmen with their eyes on foreign markets. The American missionary effort in China had been revitalized in the last decade of the nineteenth century, responding to the fear of spiritual stagnation. Just as theorists contended that overseas markets would alleviate the dangers of economic stagnation, overseas missions were sought to keep religious fervor at a revival level in the United States. The "conspicuous outpouring" of American Protestant missionary activity during the 1890s provided a "cultural counterpart to the American economic invasion."⁵⁸

The missionary movement itself had changed. Humanitarianism, nationalism, and imperialism had taken hold of the popular imagination in the 1890s. The conversion of the heathen served as a “vent for the pent-up idealism” of the time, as it incorporated the new cultural and political goals.⁵⁹

According to historian Paul Varg, a transformation in missionary ideology occurred with the introduction of humanitarian sentiment in popular American culture. He says the “old view of the necessity of missionaries for snatching the heathen from the jaws of hell” was replaced with a “new view of missions as a humanitarian agency.”⁶⁰ By dropping their emphasis on hell and stressing the spiritual and physical benefits of the Christian Gospel, missionaries demonstrated the popularity of progressivism, which emphasized the dignity of man, human welfare, and the possibility of progress. The missionaries believed in the power of the gospel to emancipate men from degrading superstition and to introduce a higher concept of life. The missionary enthusiasts believed that Christianity accounted for what they considered the superiority of American society. To them this superiority was manifested in a greater concern for human life, in the professed rights of women, in the availability of free public education, in improved treatment of children, in care for the sick, and in the practice of moral virtues. This excerpt from the China Medical Missionary Journal was characteristic of the humanitarian attitude held by the missionaries:

When a man has become an inpatient in a hospital where he must lie in bed for several days or weeks, and while under treatment must observe unselfish, unpaid for, skillful attention from the Christian surgeon or nurse, he must begin to study about it. It is then his heart will melt and open. For the first time since he was born he will realize what benevolence is. This sense is fundamental

to any apprehension of the Gospel. The Christ-like has dawned on the heathen.

Still further, when the patient shall have recovered and returned to his home, he will carry the report and spirit of the place where he has found healing.⁶¹

Both the earlier Arminian interest in saving souls and the more progressive aspects of the social Gospel were apparent here. Cure for the sick became a means for converting the natives, and the conversion of heathen became a means to an improved society.

The humanitarian motive for missionary work increasingly became endorsed by diplomats and presidents, and the missionary movement gained influential public support. Captain Alfred T. Mahan argued that the Western world had a common interest in bringing "the Asian peoples within the compass of the family of Christian states" through missionary activity. His argument sparked nationalist fears when he warned of the possible danger if China were to become Westernized technologically without accepting "the mental and moral forces which have generated, and which in large measure govern, our political action."⁶² Mahan praised the work of missionaries because he believed they were inculcating the guiding moral principles of the West. With nationalistic pride Americans looked forward to China becoming a democratic nation guided by Christian ideals and closely allied with the United States. They believed that this strategic objective would reach fulfillment thanks to the endeavors of the missionaries.

The missionary's sense of superiority and moral duty were derived from the new imperialism. Like the economic imperialists, the missionaries realized the satisfaction to be gained by developing the underdeveloped areas of the world in the image of one's own society. Notions of racial destiny and Anglo-Saxon superiority saturated missionary writings as Social Darwinism saturated Western ideology. But

these beliefs coexisted with the optimism that racial and cultural virtues were transferable. Often challenging the popular theory of racial determinism which denied the possibility of reforming backward people, the missionaries argued that transforming foreign cultures was not only possible but was the duty of any true Christian. The missionaries felt morally obliged to proclaim the Gospel, as the words of Peter Matson attest:

We were convinced of the literal truth of our Lord's promise that He would return when the Gospel had been proclaimed throughout the whole world... Our emphasis was upon reaching as many people as possible in the shortest space of time.⁶³

The evangelical impulses of popular preachers, when mixed with the Christian concepts of stewardship and the new social sciences, led to the belief that Christianity could "alter peoples' environment, lift people above their genetic heritage and into the realm of 'civilization'."⁶⁴ Furthermore, Christians were obligated to see that this took place.

The only rationale which could justify the expenditure of life and funds in a missionary effort during this period of religious revival was the one which characterized the Chinese as being in desperate need of salvation.⁶⁵ Missionaries were highly selective in their descriptions of Chinese life. The American observer's choice of topics was designed to depict the Chinese unfavorably. Missionary accounts emphasized their superstitious beliefs, strange customs, abnormal vices, and immorality. By stressing the unusual cruelties they inflicted on each other, their overcrowded cities, infanticide, and customs surrounding the life of women, the missionaries reinforced a Western sense of superiority. Although much of what they said was based on actual conditions in China, they gave only a partial

description. By including only what was necessary to cast the Chinese in the mold of a backward, barbaric people, the missionaries engendered distorted American perceptions of the Chinese.⁶⁶ The missionary described the depths of Chinese heathenism in order to solidify the American comprehension of the Chinese as a strange race.

The missionaries strongly believed they were uplifting Chinese society, and providing the natives with an opportunity to benefit by copying the superior cultural norms of the Western nations. Contrary to the expectations of these missionaries, their activities did not necessarily promote goodwill toward the United States. During the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, riots against foreigners occurred in China with increasing frequency. In the interior, missions were the most vulnerable to attacks, being the most obvious symbols of Western cultural aggression. Peter Matson gave the following account of his experience with mounting anti-foreign tension in 1892:

Everything went peacefully until the middle of July when a fearful epidemic of cholera visited (Fancheng). Somebody started the rumor that the uninvited foreigner had poisoned the wells and thus caused the epidemic. This rumor spread like prairie fire and turned the ignorant populace into a state of fury...

One day I happened into an open space in front of a temple where theatricals were going on. Thousands were gathered together, and before I knew it the cry was raised 'Kill, kill, beat him to death, the foreign devil.' A shower of stones and bricks came down upon me. Behind me was a narrow lane. Through this I beat a hasty retreat...

The mob jammed each other in the narrow passage and I succeeded in getting a good lead on them. Unfortunately the people in the street got wind of the trouble and made ready to give me a hot reception. In a few minutes the whole town seemed to be after me...

I finally reached my house somehow, but no sooner was the door shut behind me than the mob filled the street and began to yell that they were going to tear down the house over my head and take my life. This they no doubt would have done had not God interfered by sending, in the last minute, two friendly officials with a company of soldiers who managed to disperse the rabble.⁶⁷

Peter Matson's assertion that God interfered to save him in his time of need shows his level of faith, and the prevalent Christian mindset during this era. Americans often found themselves the victims of these anti-missionary activities. In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, the activities against foreigners became more widespread.⁶⁸ As Chinese riots continued, the pressures of missionaries demanding protection and retribution increased.

Several pressures on the American government influenced a change in policy regarding missionary activities and disputes over missionary questions with the Chinese. Washington first moved its missionary policy in the direction of intervention in China on behalf of the missionaries upon the recommendation of the American legation in Peking. In 1891, Charles Denby, of the Peking legation, recognized a native conspiracy to drive the foreigner out of China that would have to be met, in his opinion, with "gunboat diplomacy." In response the U.S. government increased its naval patrol on the Yangtze.⁶⁹

Contributing to this diplomatic impulse toward intervention was the lobbying and propaganda effort undertaken by the missionaries themselves. To win the support of policy-makers, they argued that the Chinese character and culture required a missionary enlightenment. To retreat in the face of violence would betray the sacrifices of previous missionaries and forsake the obligations of a

civilized nation to halt barbarism.⁷⁰ While some missionaries accepted the violence as “part of God’s great plan for blessing China,” and willingly sacrificed their lives for God’s work, others called for a more forceful reaction by the U.S. government.⁷¹

Those missionaries desiring U.S. military intervention believed a Western invasion would create turmoil and weaken China’s institutionalized resistance to Christianity. Convinced of their righteousness, some American missionaries were eager to get their views before the public. They readily granted interviews to correspondents, sent open letters to editors, and sent copies of petitions to Washington. Reverend D.Z. Sheffield suggested that a more “decidedly Christian government in Washington would permit U.S. troops to be employed in China.”⁷² He justified his call for vengeance on both theological and practical grounds, saying:

It is not bloodthirstiness in missionaries to desire to see further shedding of blood, but an understanding of Chinese character and conditions, a realization that the policy of forgiveness means the loss of many valuable native and foreign lives.⁷³

He firmly believed that the Chinese would only cease their violence following an American display of force. A fellow missionary argued that force was necessary for retribution. His editorial, which appeared in San Francisco’s *Call*, said: “...no punishment can be too severe for the murder of missionaries and innocent children. It is worth any cost in bloodshed if we can make millions of Chinese true and intelligent Christians.”⁷⁴ Some of these public statements were so vindictive that they aroused public criticism, as the editor of this same issue of the *Call*

responded: "These missionaries make a sorry spectacle of the kind of Christianity we seem to be exporting to Asia."⁷⁵

It was hard for Washington to determine the response of the American people on the issue of whether or not the government should intervene to protect the missionary. U.S. government officials were given no clear indication favoring either side, as some "howled for the heads of the Chinese rioters" and others felt that missionaries should either be willing to preach at their own risk, or should stop meddling in Chinese affairs.⁷⁶

Warren Cohen credits William Rockhill, an English member of the Chinese Customs Service, with advising Hay on America's Far Eastern policy. Cohen says, "Rockhill perceived the breakup of China would be a disaster for the balance of power in Asia. He believed the United States should use its new position in Asia and its growing influence in the world for the preservation of China's existence as a nation."⁷⁷ Thomas McCormick retorts that this analysis "grossly overestimates the importance of a quite peripheral figure, whose ideas were wholly unoriginal and whose efforts in no way affected the timing of the Open Door Notes."⁷⁸ Since the early nineteenth century the U.S. government had espoused the principles contained in the Open Door Notes. While this continuity in policy should be stressed, it was only in the decade of the 1890s that the United States had the ability to promulgate its dedication to the preservation of U.S. interests internationally, or even perceived legitimate threats to those interests. Both Alfred Mahan, with his references to American nationalism, and Brooks Adams, who said "East Asia is the prize for which all energetic nations are grasping," placed great emphasis on the importance of the power struggle in Asia for the future of America.⁷⁹

Washington had to respond to missionary and merchant interests and China's strategic importance in the Great Power rivalry in a way that addressed America's needs, conformed to her ideals, and best suited her capabilities. A less confident nation might have participated in the scramble for territory, content to have an assured but small section of the Empire. However, the United States, with a small power base and little financial capital relative to the European nations, wanted more of the China market than partitioning would guarantee. Americans were convinced of their ability to win economic hegemony in China; this conviction stemmed from the export revival of 1897, the refinancing of American industry, the progress made by key industries in the China market, and the return of prosperity in the American economy.⁸⁰ The maintenance of an American zone in China would intensify anti-imperialist sentiment while adding a bureaucratic and military burden on the McKinley administration.

The first open door note safeguarded equal trading opportunity with China. The Open Door Notes embodied the agreement with France, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, and Japan, that China would be exempted from imperial competition. With the Open Door the U.S. could avoid entangling alliances with any other power. It made use of the "de facto balance of power between the Russo-French entente and the emerging Anglo-Japanese bloc."⁸¹

John Hay took advantage of the intense fear of world war that preoccupied the Europeans. The U.S. insisted on the status quo of free trade and Chinese sovereignty which Great Britain could no longer enforce. The Europeans worried that an imbalance in this status quo would lead to conflict, and so they acquiesced to the American policy.

The United States had adapted a foreign policy to its expansive needs. The "open door" became the appropriate means for the competitive industrial Americans to assure themselves of economic hegemony in Asia instead of "settling for a pittance."⁸² It would also maintain order and political stability, not in the old European fashion of political dominion and large-scale colonialism, but with open markets and Chinese territorial integrity.

The Boxer Rebellion threatened the status quo that had just been endorsed by the concert of Western powers in their tacit approval of the Open Door Notes. Up until the Boxer Revolt missionaries and their denominational boards had enlisted the power of their government to pressure the Chinese officials to reprimand the attacks of secret societies against missionaries with beheadings. However, the Boxers eventually won the support of the Qing Dynasty, so the missionaries appealed to the U.S. for assistance in promoting the Christian Gospel, protecting American and Chinese lives, and maintaining order. The U.S. demonstrated its willingness to defend missionary rights when the Chinese government failed to protect American citizens under its treaty obligations. The Boxers laid siege, with the prodding of the Qing Empress CiXi, to the foreign legations quarter in Peking. In addition they wreaked havoc on the missionaries in the countryside. The confusion of the summer of 1900 can be seen in the following letter from the American Consul to Peter Matson as he fled his mission in Siangyang:

1 P.M.
Hankow, July 19, 1900

Dear Mr. Matson,

[Your letter was read this morn at 10 o'clock...arrived last night at 11.] Everything is quiet here, the British, Swedish consuls and myself have tried all morn to get a steam launch to go to meet you and the Jamesons party of 24

that started from Siangyang at daylight the 12th. The Canadian Presbyterian [sic] missionaries (21) that were with Jameson had a desbrat [sic] fight and were robbed of everything near Nanyang...

Try and leave the note I send for James so it will be handed to him when they get where you are now. No news reliable from Peking as to what has become of all the foreigners there, including the minister (some name) killed June 16th and the last report was Peking burnt and all are killed. Can't tell whether we can send launch or not but will do our best--

But don't loose [sic] anytime getting here as trouble may brake [sic] out any hour. Can't you induce your men to work by offering a reward if they get you here at a certain time?

A good many missions have been burnt at Hunan. There is another party of missionaries behind Jameson. Send them word that all is quiet but to loose [sic] no time. I would advise you after reaching here to hurry on to Shanghai. The Chinese are working like bees fortifying all along the Yangtze and especially at Chienkiang and we may get caught in a trap. Get here.

Yours in haste,

L. S. Wilcox, Consul⁸³

With such information coming out of China, the Boxer Revolt awakened a widespread interest in the missionary question. Rev. W. S. Ament, an American missionary quoted during the rebellion as saying "the soft hand of the Americans is not as good as the mailed fist of the Germans," was not content with waiting for the slow-moving legal channels of diplomacy for vengeance. He instead cajoled American officers into permitting him to guide a squad of cavalry into the countryside in search of Boxers and their supporters. He "found houses that had been deserted but which bore evidence of Boxer occupation and they were duly burned." Captain Forsythe, the American unit's commander, later explained that "these bloodthirsty missionaries" wanted him to shoot "suspected Boxers on the spot and burn down the towns in which they were harbored."⁸⁴

The Boxer Rebellion has been interpreted as a catalyst for this shift in government policy to aid the American missionaries devoted to uplifting China and advancing national influence. The Open Door Policy in the new era still reflects some American attitudes from the old. The Boxer Rebellion did not just serve as background to the enunciation of a more forceful policy, but also led to a re-evaluation of American commitments. Because of pressure from other interest groups and a new administration's interpretation of the changing world power situation, Washington had already been prepared for intervention in China.

The Boxer Rebellion aggravated merchant pressure for armed U.S. protection of commerce. Traders had lost their market, and prospective investors halted their activity. Most of the violence centered in North China and Manchuria, where the cotton goods industry had been most active, so the U.S. cotton textile enterprises were endangered. Terrified businessmen exclaimed "tens of thousands of American working men are interested in having our government do its share to bring back East Asia from utter anarchy."⁸⁵ The American Asiatic Association of businessmen telegraphed Sec. Hay that "only immediate concerted action by the powers could prevent China from lapsing into such conditions as would nullify the recent Open Door Notes."⁸⁶

With the lives of American diplomats, missionaries, and businessmen threatened in China, the McKinley administration had both the resources and the will to protect the Americans and their interests against the Chinese. Sure of support from these segments of the electorate for a "strong policy" in China, four months before the presidential election McKinley sent five thousand soldiers to China and addressed a letter to the other Great Powers.⁸⁷ This July circular stated in part:

The policy of the Government of the United States is to seek a solution which may bring about permanent safety and peace to China, preserve Chinese territorial and administrative entity, protect all rights guaranteed to friendly powers by treaty and international law, and safeguard for the world the principle of equal and impartial trade with all parts of the Chinese Empire.⁸⁸

The actions of Americans in China, particularly merchants and missionaries, effected a policy transformation within the United States government which led to active governmental intervention and propagation of the principles of the Open Door. Missionaries and merchants cherished the opportunities China offered. Prior to the 1890s the U.S. government was reluctant to intervene in Asia on their behalf. It sought to maintain its interests without the use of force. But America's capabilities by the end of the century had changed, and new threats to the status quo had arisen. Thus the Boxer Rebellion showed a need for a more forceful diplomatic strategy, one that was already being considered by Washington.

The McKinley administration's effective use of the open door was assisted by European imperialists and Chinese hostile to foreigners, because these two groups external to the United States helped to sway public opinion within the U.S. The Open Door was not a haphazard development; it was consistent with American idealism and the rhetoric of statesmen, missionaries, and merchants since the creation of the treaty port system. But American sentiment in the 1890s, pervaded by humanitarianism, nationalism, and imperialism, supported a new diplomatic strategy. America was no longer confined to the conduct of jackal diplomacy, but looking forward to the realization of a Pacific Destiny, and the Open Door is symbolic of how that was to be achieved. The Open Door Policy was a realistic policy which blended means and ends for the greatest U.S. advantage given the realities of America's power position in 1900.

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